strung through the tether by birthdaycandles

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Author's Note:

- For floralathena.

  > romantic steve/robin shippers begone from here!! she is a lesbian and this fic is about their platonic relationship <3

Robin doesn't remember the first time she felt it. It would be like asking someone they first time they ever cried or laughed or flexed their fingers--an impossible answer lost somewhere on the floor of her oceanic memory. It was just there from the moment she was born and she didn't bother questioning it until she was around ten years old. A little earlier than the typical age to get the talk, but not unheard of.

She's pretty sure she got her talk early because the instances of her ankle suddenly radiating pain or random patches on her arms and legs stinging with the sensation of a scrape happened so frequently. They happened frequently for her soulmate, too, because Robin was a clumsy kid. Her mom used to tut under her breath that it was unlucky *both* of them were apparently so prone to injury, but Robin always thought of it as romantic. At least when she was a kid she did. The talk explained how it all worked, why his pain was her pain and vice versa, but it didn't answer any of the questions she would come to formulate in the following years.

Questions like: what makes someone your soulmate? Questions like: why do so many people get married even if they aren't soulmates? Questions like: who ever said it was a boy?

Her parents always assumed it was a boy. It was always well you don't have a fever, *he* must not be feeling well today. You need to stop climbing trees or *his* hands will hurt just as bad. The whole thing only added to Robin's blooming confusion every time she watched Grease and impatiently waited for Sandy to put on the black top that showed more than the white one. If her soulmate was a boy, she probably shouldn't want to kiss girls. It felt like cheating, somehow.

Betraying someone she didn't even know.

Like most things, Robin had to learn everything her parents left out through word of mouth from her friends at school. Even people who weren't her friends, sometimes, like when Alex Sterling was freeloading off her hiding spot in the tunnel slide at recess and informed her that people can have more than one soulmate. Robin had said no way, that didn't even make sense. Alex said it did too make sense because what are you supposed to do if your soulmate dies in a plane crash or something? You have to have back-ups. Robin insisted she didn't believe him and kicked him down the slide, but she laid awake that night wondering if she was someone's back-up.

She used to dream about meeting them. She broke her wrist when she was twelve, absolutely shattered her bone on the metal railing of the back gate at Abigail's house after trying to balance like an Olympic gymnast, and at the hospital she patiently waited for her soulmate to show up clutching at their own arm. It would be simple enough. They'd feel the pain, realize it was too severe to be anything but hospital worthy, and come find her.

No one came but her parents. They confused her tears of frustration for pain and did all the parent things, stroked her hair back and cooed and asked the nurses if there was anything else to give her, but that was really it. After that, Robin stopped expecting to meet them. She read news stories about people who found their soulmates by traveling the world, accidentally stumbling upon them in an entirely different country. Magazine articles from her pre-teen years featured quizzes in pink bubble letters informing her that her soulmate was someone blonde, bubbly, and bright based on her answer about which subject in school was her favorite. It all felt fairly useless. She entered high school with a cynical, combative view towards the entire thing. It was stupid to base your entire life around something so completely fruitless and it was stupid to date anyone who wasn't your soulmate anyways and it was stupid to have to carry around someone else's pain for them. She told that to everyone she met, certain they'd marvel at her very mature view of the world. More often than not, they didn't.

Tammy did.

They met at the Fall Frenzy which was a stupid name for a cool event. The band, orchestra, and choir would spend the first few weeks of school learning the same songs for a big concert at the end of the month where they all came together and played for their parents. Robin picked up on the clarinet quickly enough that Mr. Ellis gave her the honor of playing the sophomore song instead of the much slower, clunkier freshman song and she ended up in the chair that directly faced Tammy's spot on the stage. The choir girls had to wear these long black dresses that made them look like obelisks singing show tunes and Tammy's must have been a hand-me-down from a much taller sister because the fabric bunched up around her feet and she lost balance, staggering sideways and directly into Robin.

Tammy stepped on her foot. Robin wiggled her toes and tapped at the ground and stared into Tammy's wide blue eyes that were already crinkling at the corners because she was capable of laughing the entire thing off and prayed that the pain in her foot was the good type. Blonde, bubbly, and bright. *Seventeen* was onto something.

Tammy found her backstage afterwards, breathlessly relaying an apology that was almost too quick for Robin to catch every word.

"It's fine." She insisted, evoking a wide smile that made her stomach dip like the floor had just given way beneath them. Then, in an attempt to garner information, she carefully said, "It doesn't even hurt anymore."

"Good!" Is all Tammy said in response, beaming at her. "You were really good, by the way. I've never seen a freshman get moved up like that."

"Oh, yeah." Robin said in response, unsure how to respond in a way that wasn't too braggy but also not too humble in a fake way. Her mouth felt dry. She had always wondered if small things like that, dry mouth and cracked knuckles, were really shared between soulmates. She wondered if Tammy's mouth was dry at that moment too.

"Well if you keep that up, you can hang with me at every Fall Frenzy." Tammy said. "I promise not to wipe out on you next time."

Robin spent the next year practicing her clarinet every day, then worrying that if she got too good she'd be moved up another year, then shaving off practice time to account for that. She talked to Tammy every chance she got. They waved in the hallways and found each other after school when they were both staying for their respective extracurriculars and finally, Tammy invited Robin to sleep over at her house. It was seemingly on a whim, a sudden prompt that felt entirely too casual for such a momentous occasion. Robin would find out later that night, after a painfully awkward dinner of silence and dry vegetables, that Tammy's parents wouldn't fight if she had a friend over.

"They're soulmates, you know." Tammy whispered while they laid on their backs in her living room. Her house was huge. The ceiling was high, a million miles above them, and the door to her parents' room loomed down the hallway to remind them that they were supposed to be asleep. "They found each other in college. I literally don't even believe it sometimes but they, like, insist that my dad feels my mom's arthritis and stuff. It just doesn't make sense."

"I don't believe in soulmates." Robin whispered back. Unlike everyone else, Tammy hadn't heard this opinion from Robin yet. She just seemed like the kind of person who would wholeheartedly believe, so Robin always hesitated for fear of messing up her chances. But then, as Tammy's voice wobbled on her last word, it seemed like the right time. "I think it only works for like, two percent of the population. Everyone else either doesn't find theirs or they do and they don't really like them."

Tammy sniffled. "You don't want to find yours?"

They were laying only a few inches apart. Robin could have reached over and grabbed Tammy's hand over the slick nylon of their sleeping bags. She could have rolled onto her side and met her eyes or maybe even brushed her hair back. But she couldn't, really. Tammy would probably make her go home. Tammy would probably never speak to her again.

"I mean, I do." Robin said carefully. "But if I don't like them, I'm not going to pretend I do. And if I find someone else I like and we aren't soulmates, that won't stop me."

Tammy paused for a long time. Finally, following a decisive sniffle, Tammy reaffirmed, “Yeah. I don’t believe in them either.”

People rarely agreed with Robin on this subject. And oddly enough, laying there on Tammy’s floor with an ache in her back because her sleeping bag didn’t provide nearly enough padding between her spine and the hardwood, Robin once again felt that little flash of guilt. Her soulmate was somewhere, back aching, completely unaware that she wasn’t even counting on being with them.

It’s been a year since the sleepover. Robin is fifteen, a sophomore who will play her clarinet with the juniors this week, and by the grace of God Tammy is bad enough at English to stay back and take sophomore level again. God must want to even things out, though, because Steve Harrington is also held back in English and seated directly in front of her.

She doesn’t like him almost instinctively. Robin generally tries to be one of those open-minded, friendly to everyone type people. It’s almost required considering her wide range of activities—there are sporty girls she gets along with on her soccer team, drama kids she’s already starting to like in her new theater class, obviously an abundance of band geeks. But no one has ever lost out on any meaningful experiences by not associating with rich kid jocks.

His entire existence is already shoved down her throat enough as it is. There are parties at his house seemingly every Saturday night, basketball games every Thursday, posters to elect him as student body president that Steve doesn’t even seem to be involved with. He gets to leave class early on game days because English is seventh period and people clap. They *clap*. Like he’s a war hero who’s going off to jump on a grenade rather than throwing a ball into a hoop for an hour.

She can’t help but be slightly interested in him, though, and she hates it. It’s like the inexplicable draw of shiny Hollywood celebrities. Why should she care what Harrison Ford’s favorite LA eateries are? She shouldn’t, but she does because some people’s lives are so enchantingly different from her own that she can’t help but peek in. Just to see. What she sees from the very first week of sitting behind Steve is that he writes his name too big on his worksheets, his letters

appearing crossed out because they dip below the solid black line. She sees that his backpack is weirdly organized for a guy who was held back in English. She sees that he writes notes on torn out notebook paper meant for Nancy Wheeler. The pairing is so random it makes Robin wonder if Steve and Nancy are soulmates. It's the only explanation she can possibly see that would explain them willingly associating.

When Robin catches herself looking at Steve too much, she forces her attention back to Tammy for a routine scan.

The annoying thing about Tammy is that she is apparently physically invincible. They never saw each other much before, and when they did Robin would do a cursory scan in all the areas that she's felt bursts of pain recently. There was never anything visible. No bruises, cuts, scrapes. Robin figures Mrs. Click's English class will be the perfect opportunity to take a closer look for more consistent data collection. If she wasn't blocked by Steve Harrington's stupid hair, it would be perfect. But she'll take what she can get.

She's been practicing in preparation for Fall Frenzy nearly nonstop. *Seventeen* never mentioned anything about flirting via excellent clarinet playing, but there's no harm in trying. On Thursday, she wakes up with a sore throat that makes itself known as she swallows her toast in the morning and gradually increases until she's tearing through every cabinet in the house in search of miracle lozenges that might miraculously restore her ability to play the next day. She drinks tea with honey and takes a too hot shower to stand in the steam and rinses with saltwater until the very second before the concert starts.

She'd love to blame this on her soulmate, but one look down her throat in the mirror absolves them of any blame. Her tonsils look kinda...puffy? Definitely not the size they should be. It means her soulmate is currently suffering through the same scorching burn at the base of their throat when they swallow or talk or breathe, but if they were to look in the mirror they'd find entirely normal sized tonsils. Unless they both somehow get inflamed throats at the same time, an occurrence Robin has asked about many times and never gotten a straightforward answer.

She doesn't have time to feel bad for her soulmate because the odds that they have an important concert involving the proper usage of their throat is astronomically low. Robin is still looking at herself in the mirror when the realization visibly dawns on her expression. The chances are low, but not exactly zero. *Tammy.*

Not only is she apart of the choir ensemble tomorrow, Tammy has a solo. She dismissed it as small and only given to her because April Kempter graduated, perfectly nailing the humbleness conundrum, but it's the kind of moment that will answer the question once and for all. Robin couldn't sing a solo right now. She can barely fucking talk.

Robin considers skipping all together. No one would blame her and she could just remain entirely oblivious. Keep referring to her soulmate as *they* instead of facing the looming reality that it's probably a fucking *he*. If she really wanted to find out if it was Tammy, she could have by now. Could have come up with something to get her answer. The answer is just probably going to fucking suck.

She imagines it as a big moment. In her head, it plays out rather dramatically. The lights will dim into a spotlight around Tammy and the music will crescendo and she'll open her mouth to deliver the solo and it'll sound angelic, crystal clear, and Robin's heart will be broken. It excludes the obvious facts that, one, Hawkins High doesn't have the budget for that kind of lighting technique and, two, it's over the moment Tammy sings the first song along with the ensemble. Her voice is normal. Robin's throat is still burning. A broken heart doesn't really feel the way she expected. She feels sort of...numb. Desensitized, maybe, because she sort of knew it all along.

She wonders if he, whoever he is, feels numb too.

Robin finds her parents after the concert. Tammy is probably somewhere in the back hallways but for the first time, Robin doesn't feel like talking to her. While the heartache hasn't set in just yet, there's an undeniable weight of crushing humiliation in her chest. The very idea that she ever even considered it might actually be Tammy seems ridiculous and naive from where she's standing now. And anyways, she can barely talk.

Over the weekend, Robin cleans out her closet. Cleaning has always

been her go-to method of distracting her brain from unwanted thoughts, like if she'll die alone, and there's an accumulating mountain of junk blocking the door from fully opening. By Monday the process is only half done and Robin's voice is less than half back at its usual capacity, so she skips school. She throws her magazines into a pile for her mom to later repurpose into scrapbook materials and idly wonders if Tammy notices her empty seat in Click's class. Probably not, though. Every time she's felt Tammy looking in her general direction and sneaked a look to confirm, she discovered that her eyes were actually a few inches ahead of Robin. On Steve Harrington.

On Tuesday she wakes up able to swallow slightly more comfortably. Mom only allows her to get on the bus in the morning because there have been no other symptoms, but she calls out the door that the next time this happens Robin is losing those tonsils once and for all, which makes her shudder in the still-warm morning air. She hates doctors.

She prepares herself all day to talk to Tammy in seventh period. Not that much talking is really required in a conversation with Tammy, because she has a knack for filling awkward silences in a way that feel natural and genuine, but she might have to at least compliment her solo. In all honesty Robin didn't even really hear the solo when it happened. She was too deep in her wallowing and clarinet playing.

Mrs. Click is passing out a quiz that Robin didn't know about when she sits down. They're halfway through *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which she read in middle school and doesn't remember nearly well enough to take intensive chapter quizzes on. In front of her, Click skims three papers out of the pile and hands them to Steve to hand back, to which he murmurs a quiet, "Thanks."

"Nice to hear you're getting your voice back." Mrs. Click tells him, and this time it is dramatic. This time Robin feels her heart seemingly shudder to a stop and the hum of talking in the classroom blurs away into one big overwhelming sound and Steve Harrington is turned around in his seat trying to hand her a quiz, looking at her with his eyebrows knit in confusion.

"Are you...okay?" Steve asks after another few seconds or maybe

another few minutes fly past, Robin has no idea which. She can't bring herself to look at his face for another second. His voice is distinctly raspier than usual, but not entirely gone. Just like Robin's. Out of an irrational urge not to let him hear it, she just nods and hastily takes the quiz.

She stares at the first question for five minutes, not reading it, her brain so overloaded she can genuinely feel the beginning of a migraine. Which Steve Harrington can also feel, apparently. But no, no fucking way. Your soulmate is someone you match. Your interests and your personality and your *souls* have to line up enough for the universe to decide you're worth feeling each other's pain. Steve Harrington is nothing like her. And he's a *boy*.

But she's never even talked to him. But if he was her soulmate, wouldn't she have felt like, cosmically drawn to talk to him by now? But maybe there was a draw and she ignored it in favor of Tammy. *But--*

Robin ends up circling random answers and turning the quiz in first so she can put her head down on her desk and try to calm down her heart rate. In front of her, Steve cracks the knuckle of his thumb around his pencil and Robin jerks her hand into her lap, almost positive she felt a slight pressure. No, that doesn't make sense. It has to be significant pain. She peeks up at her view of his back. He's wearing a blue striped polo, like he's at some kind of yacht club meeting as opposed to public high school, and his hair is all gelled up off his neck. No bruises or cuts anywhere for her to test. She could always just ask, but even as her brain suggests this she's already dismissing the idea entirely. He won't believe it for a second. He's dating someone else for fuck's sake.

Nancy Wheeler. Robin grabs her bag and springs from her seat the second the bell rings, speed-walking down the hallway to the exact location she knows Nancy will be. Barb Holland's locker is directly beside Robin's. Every day without fail she has to tap Nancy's shoulder and politely ask her to move from where she leans her shoulder up against Robin's locker and today she can do the same thing and listen for any hint of scratchiness when Nancy says her usual breezy, "Oh, sorry."

Robin squeezes her finger around the lock, contemplating. She couldn't detect any scratch but it was such a brief moment of speech. Too brief to be sure. Robin glances into the little plastic mirror hanging on the inside of her locker door and becomes well aware that she looks insane with her wide eyes and messy hair that she pulled at for all of Click's class, but she doesn't care. She rounds on Nancy and interrupts her right in the middle of a conversation about study plans to say, "Hey."

Nancy and Barb both turn to look at her, wearing matching startled expressions. Her tone was maybe a little too confrontational, so she softens it and tries to think of something to say that will yield a longer reply from Nancy and also not make her look so unhinged.

"Um, your boyfriend is in my English class." She starts, which must be the wrong thing to say because Nancy's face immediately turns a light pink color and Barb's jaw tightens like she just bit into something revolting.

"Steve isn't my boyfriend." Nancy says hastily, which is strange. He definitely writes her notes about where to meet, obviously to make out. But maybe it makes sense, because Nancy's voice is undeniably clear. Did the break up because she realized it herself? Has it even clicked for Steve? Does he just not care in the first place because he can already sense that his soulmate is defective?

"Oh. Sorry." Robin forces herself to say as an adequate end to the conversation before returning to her locker. Nancy's eyes are still on her.

"Was that...all you wanted to say?" Nancy asks. Her hair is pulled back so it's half up, half down, secured with little silver clips that must be stronger than they look. It's not really cold enough for a cardigan yet but she's got a pink one pulled over her shoulders that perfectly compliments the blouse and skirt made up of blue, pink, and white flowers. *She* should be Steve's soulmate. She dresses like it.

Robin suddenly feels like crying for the first time since she discovered without a doubt it isn't Tammy. It's all so fucking unfair. Nancy likes Steve if the persevering flush to her cheeks is any indication and Steve must like her and Robin likes Tammy and none of them even

match. It was just decided for them before they were even born that they should ignore their own instincts and trust their nerves instead. The longer she looks at Nancy, the more concerned and definitely weirded out Nancy gets, so Robin hastily turns back to her locker and says, “I was just gonna, um, ask how he did on the quiz but I guess you probably don’t know.”

“No, I don’t.” Nancy confirms. Her tone is eerily similar to the way Mom speaks to cashiers when her coupons don’t go through and she assumes it means they’re just horrible at their jobs. Robin shoulders her backpack and tries to look casual, like she isn’t being a freak, and does a sort of nod in lieu of a goodbye. She can already hear Barb murmuring something as she starts down the hall, vowing not to look up until she’s off the bus and back in her own home.

The night is a manic blur of different ideas. Robin goes from deciding to ignore the whole thing and watch whatever movies are on cable to holding the landline in her hand with the phonebook open to Steve’s number on the floor in front of her to drafting a note to slip into his locker to considering if there’s a relatively quick way to break a bone. Nothing feels right about it. She saw a segment on some interview type show where a trio comprised of two men and one woman sat in big comfy chairs and insisted that they were all three soulmates. It was one of those shows where you were supposed to laugh at the guests rather than sympathize with them because the next guest was a man who ate dirt.

Mom said the triad was faking. Until that point, Robin had never considered someone faking a soulmate connection. Why would you? But it really would be easy to either conceal the pain you feel or pretend you’re in pain. Robin could potentially just ignore this forever and spend Click’s class papering over every ache and pain with a neutral expression, then never speak to Steve Harrington again and just ignore the institution of soulmates like she’s always planned. This doesn’t have to change anything. Maybe Alex Sterling and the trio were right all along and you really can have more than one.

And. Robin still doesn’t know that it’s really Steve. A million people on planet Earth can have a sore throat all at once without being soulmates. If she can find out once and for all, she can move on from there. Go through with her plan to ignore it.

She spends several days in Click's class contemplating it. She could slice her thumb open with her pencil lead, maybe? But would Steve really react to that? She decides against it. She waits for him to get a papercut or twist his ankle getting up but he's stupidly graceful. It could be a good sign. Her soulmate is definitely a klutz.

The plan to avoid Steve is set back even further when she looks at the schedule in the band hall and realizes it's her week to play at the basketball game. The band program is too big for them to all fit in the tiny section of bleachers designated for their repetitive spirit song playing, so they rotate. Robin resigns herself to a night of being squished between Eric Keener and Lisa Patel in a too hot gymnasium while people scream from every direction.

She doesn't even realize until the game has started that it's an important game, apparently. The rivalry between Hawkins High and Hillview High is very manufactured in her opinion, though Hillview's logo of double H's is designed a little better than theirs and Robin wishes it wasn't. Still, people care about the tigers versus the cobras apparently because the bleachers are more packed than usual and they're having to double down on fight songs.

Robin tracks Steve despite herself. He's well and fully in his element and admittedly responsible for the eleven point lead they have at the moment. His signature move seems to be faking out the defense of the other team, making them think he's going one way and then shooting down the court to score in the other. She would've thought he'd be haughtier about the cheers directed solely at him, but there's no egotistical smirking like she expected. He seems concentrated. Taking the game so seriously as if it has an important bearing on the real world.

The ball is stolen from someone she doesn't recognize on the Hawkins team and barrels in the opposite direction, sending everyone pivoting with the sharp screech of sneakers. Robin keeps watching as she taps out the fight song and they're just starting to crescendo when it happens. On any other night, she wouldn't have seen it. She usually doesn't even watch the games. But tonight she's looking at Steve despite herself and she watches the guy he's guarding inexplicably try to shoot *through* him, effectively nailing Steve in the nose.

Pain blinds Robin, knocking her off balance and tilting her forward. There's a hand on her left shoulder, the sound of Lisa's trumpet ceasing as she yells over the indignantly screaming crowd to ask if she's okay. Robin is a lot of things at the moment but she's *not* okay. She lifts her head, view of the court blurred by the tears gathering in her eyes, and sees Steve knelt on the court with a hand cradling his nose just like she's cradling hers. Except his is dripping blood onto his Nikes.

Steve staggers to his feet after a few seconds and there's a referee trying to escort him off the court, who Steve shrugs off and makes a frustrated gesture at as he marches towards the double doors on his own. Robin is already shoving her clarinet into Lisa's hands before she can process the action and takes the bleachers down two at a time.

She misses him in the hallway, only catching the door to the boy's locker room swinging shut behind him. Robin pushes through and is immediately assaulted by the undeniable smell of boy which nearly makes her gag. Past one row of lockers, she finds him. Sitting on the bench in the center of the next locker block with a tee shirt pressed to his face slowly turning from light gray to a dark red.

"I'm *coming*." Steve snaps without looking up at her and she flinches. When she was younger, Robin's parents took her to the San Diego zoo. Her heart was set on seeing the lions. She had unceremoniously decided one day that they were her favorite animal and for every following Christmas, birthday, and in between celebration she was showered in stuffed lions, themed clothing, even jewelry from novelty gift shops. She had been so excited and then, when the time came and she was maneuvered to the front of the crowd to get a good look of the lions through the glass, she was terrified. She cried until Mom and Dad gave up on trying to calm her and took her to see the otters instead.

It feels like that. Her whole life waiting to meet her soulmate, expecting a sunset and white cotton dresses and instant chemistry and instead she gets...this. This boy so filled to the brim with anger, covered in blood and sweat.

He looks up at the silence he's met with and his eyes widen. His

shoulders relax just perceptibly.

“Oh.” He says, then lowers the shirt and cautiously feels for blood above his lip. “Uh, Rachel?”

“My name is *Robin*.” She snaps back, echoing the sharpness of his own tone a second ago. “And I’m your soulmate.”

Steve stares at her, expression blank. “Really?”

If anything his tone is unguarded at the moment. She expected horror, maybe disgust, maybe even tears depending on how much he believed in the entire thing. Her heart rate is slowing down. Her nose still hurts like hell. She’s suddenly very tired, all of the fight draining from her body like a plug was pulled.

“Yeah, really.” To demonstrate, she lifts one arm and slaps at her wrist as hard as she can. It echoes in the empty room and Steve flinches, looking down at his own left wrist with bewilderment. “Feel that?”

“Yes.” Steve breathes, seemingly awestruck. “Jesus Christ, I—you’re —I can’t—“

It’s strange watching him grasp at words. Like watching a great white shark flop around uselessly out of the water. She’s rendered him so ineffective, so different from what he usually is. Robin takes a few steps forward to prop herself up against a locker.

“I know, it doesn’t make sense.” Robin mutters. “Look, I’m cool with just ignoring it.”

Steve stops staring at his wrist long enough to meet her eyes. “Ignoring it? How can we ignore it? It’s not like we can, like, turn it off. My throat *really* hurt last week.”

His tone is so accusatory it almost makes her laugh. But now Robin is emotionally thrown back to sixth grade, when she sat on the bus every day next to Alan Galloway who presented her with pencil drawings on carefully folded notebook paper every day. It was right when she realized that her not liking Alan wasn’t about his personality or looks or whatever, it was about him not being a girl.

Every day she accepted the drawings because what else could she do? And every day the guilt increased as she continued to stall and lie and tell him her parents wouldn't let her date anybody.

Here's Steve Harrington, reacting surprisingly well to the news that he's cosmically tied to her forever after not even knowing her name two minutes ago, and she has to go through the whole ordeal again. She's never been good at clearly and concisely ending things. She tries to end relationships with one clean shot to the head, but always ends up missing and having to hack at them until they're twitching and bloody on the ground beneath her.

Not that this is even a relationship, but Steve's eyes are looking straight at her. Into her, almost.

"Listen, I just." Robin stands up straight and unlocks the safety. "I just don't really see us having anything together, okay? I've thought about it a lot and I don't even really believe in soulmate stuff anyways, so. I'm sorry if that sucks for you but that's how I feel."

Steve scoffs. He's indignant. Probably, no girl has ever turned him down in his life. "Wow, Jesus, okay. Who said I ever wanted anything with you?"

It stings even though she started it. "You got all worked up when I said we should ignore it."

"Yeah because I think ignoring it is impossible but I never said I wanted to marry you or something! I mean I have a—" He stops himself, apparently unsure how to explain himself and Nancy just like she had been. "I'm not into you that way."

"Good." Robin shrugs.

"Good." Steve echoes, still scoffing out all his words. He shakes his head, incredulous. Under his breath, almost to himself, he murmurs, "Not how I thought this was gonna go."

"Yeah, well." Robin turns to leave. She thought she would feel relieved after this. He didn't react horribly, he mostly seems to agree that they shouldn't try to fall in love, and now he's just sort of sitting

there with his shoulders slumped forward. There's no fight being put up. Still, as she's facing the door to leave, Robin hesitates. Just slightly. Steve must see it.

"So we're just like never gonna talk, then?" Steve asks. "I get not dating but like, we can't just completely ignore it. I mean there's a reason for it."

She turns. "What's the reason?"

"Well I don't know." His tone drips with *duh.* "That's like, up to God and shit."

"God?"

"I'm catholic."

"Okay." She sighs. "Well if we both know we aren't interested in being together in like a romantic sense then what's really the point in talking?"

Steve looks at her like she's insane. "We're probably platonic soulmates."

Now it's Robin's turn to look at him like *he's* insane, which he must be. "There's no such thing."

"Yes there is. Nancy Wheeler has one."

"What?"

"Nancy Wheeler. She's in your grade? Brown hair, tiny, she wears—"

"I know Nancy." Robin is half surprised that Nancy hasn't mentioned their encounter the other day to Steve. She's grateful, though. She doesn't need him thinking she's any crazier than she appears right now. "So you know you aren't her soulmate?"

"Yeah." Steve shrugs. "Barbara Holland is her soulmate. But it's platonic, you know? Just friends."

Robin swallows around a lump in her throat. She always wondered

about Barb, idly rolling the idea around in her brain during band practice while peering over at her from across the room. It was like she had this sonar technology implanted in her brain. A lesbian beacon. Of course Steve Harrington believes in the idea of platonic soulmates when the alternative is his new girlfriend being gay. If someone *can* have more than one, one of Robin's will be a girl. They have to be. Steve would probably assume that one is platonic too, like Robin isn't deserving of anyone to love beyond friendship.

She nearly says something else, but the words die in her throat before they can get out. It's better that way. If she talks her voice will be wobbly. Instead, she turns to leave once and for all, evoking a noise of confusion from Steve.

"Wait." He says. "Um, on Tuesday we're having like a small party thing. Really small. Tommy Hagan and Carol Perkins and Nancy. Maybe Barb, I guess. You could come if you want?"

A party consisting of two people she despises, a soulmate pair that doesn't know they're gay, and him. Robin can't imagine a worse time.

"I'm good."

She steps into the hallway, taking an enormous gulp of air that doesn't smell like sweat, and marches past the noisy gym to the front office. She's calling her mom to come get her early. She can fake a stomach ache or something, even blame it on Steve, and start the process of erasing him from her life. From now on she'll just pretend his pain belongs to someone else. Someone more worthy of it.

She won't entertain the thought of a platonic soulmate. Not even for a second. Not even late at night while she's trying to fall asleep, feeling an inexplicable gap somewhere in her heart that wasn't there yesterday.

For days, Robin walks around in a thick fog. Her appetite is all messed up and she flinches every time she feels any sudden pain. One night there's a sharp sting on her thumb, likely the result of being nicked with a knife while chopping something, and it makes Robin cry for no reason. She keeps her head down in Click's class, ignoring Steve and ignoring Tammy. The world feels like it's been knocked off

its axis.

It seems to be affecting more than just her. A kid goes missing over the weekend. Will Byers, whose last name sounds familiar but Robin can't place it. The crime shows her dad watches say that after the first forty-eight hours, the odds of the kid coming back alive are slim. Robin doesn't even think about Steve's party on Tuesday night because she's too busy counting the hours since she first heard about the kid.

From there, things keep sliding. The Earth is off center and people are apparently just falling off the edge. Nancy doesn't lean against her locker at all for the next few days and Barb never opens hers. Steve starts keeping *his* head down in class, suddenly not in the mood to chatter away with everyone sitting around them.

Posters for Barb go up on Thursday. They have an assembly in the gym about a town curfew and walking home in pairs and reporting suspicious activity to the police, all relayed by a gangly cop who stumbles over his words when someone asks if Barb is dead. Robin is suddenly thinking about everything but Steve. They watch the news every night, hopeful but not by much, until Mom gets weepy and turns it off and hugs Robin on the couch for too long.

When they find the kid's body in the lake, Robin cries. It's probably a selfish thought to have, borderline evil, but she thinks it feels good to cry for someone else. It feels like every emotion she's had over the past month that's been stuck inside her is getting flushed out and cried away for a worthy cause.

She's washing her face on Saturday afternoon to relieve some of the puffy redness in her eyes. It's starting to feel a little insane, the nonstop weeping for this kid she doesn't know. Every time her parents notice it they attempt to soothe her by saying she's safe, they won't let anything happen to her, and that only feels worse. She knows she's safe. Will Byers, who's five years younger than her and really tiny in the pictures around town, isn't. That's the issue.

Robin scrubs some hot water onto her cheeks with one of Mom's fancy hand towels. She's squirting a glob of moisturizer onto the tips of her fingers when something smacks her in the face, directly on the

cheek. Her hand instinctively grips the counter for support, smearing it with moisturizer, as her brain scrambles to catch up. She looks into the mirror at her unmarred face and realizes it's Steve. Something just struck Steve so hard that it *throbs* and—

Another one. This time it's on the nose, just like at the basketball game, and she can instantly tell it's broken. She doesn't need to hear the crack or see the crookedness for herself. Uselessly, she presses both hands to her face and groans as the new blossoms of pain spread all over her face and repeatedly pulse with added intensity.

There's another feeling, which she hasn't felt in a long time. Maybe since four or five years ago, when the back of her head hurt like hell and she had matching nausea and an unrelenting migraine. *He must have a concussion,* Dad said, *poor kid.* She worried for him. She felt like she was dying and she remembered what Alex Sterling said. What do you do if your soulmate dies? And now she has a face to picture. She pictures Steve in pain and she shouldn't care but she does.

There's an urgency deep in her stomach that makes it all fluttery and panicked and she knows she has to find him. She has to talk to Steve. Five minutes ago she would have dreaded the thought but now it seems like she'll die if she doesn't. Or maybe he will.

Robin goes back to the phone book and calls the number. There's no answer all three times. Her next thought is to try and find his home address. She knows someone who lives on his street, right? It might be Carly but it could also be Anthony but it could also be Blake. She doesn't have time to look up all those numbers and call around and explain herself. Plus, the way her face is phantom throbbing makes the entire ordeal sound excruciating.

Robin gets on her bike. There's a candlelit vigil at the school this evening, which she was already planning on going to and crying at. If she gets there an hour or two early, she can stake out and look for Nancy or Tommy or someone who would know where Steve is. It's not the best plan, but it's all she has. The cool wind should feel soothing on her face, but wherever Steve is must not have the same breeze. Her whole life, she's never gotten over having pain she can't remedy.

For some reason, it's just now occurring to her that you *can* remedy it. You can find your soulmate and hold some ice to their face. You can take care of them and thus take care of yourself. It seems so simple in hindsight.

Robin gets to Main and her legs are getting sore. Steve's legs are getting sore too. Off in the distance, she can see a small bunch of people huddled around a ladder in front of the movie theater and she vacantly hopes they're not shutting the place down in favor of something else. Then she reads the marquee. Then she sees who's on the ladder.

"Steve!" She yells before she even starts braking on her bike. His head turns but he can't exactly turn to face her from his position on top of the ladder. Instead, he starts descending. The two men holding it for him scatter, giving Robin a cursory glance as she coasts to a stop and they retreat back inside.

His face is fucked. Nose definitely broken, like she thought. Black eye. Bloody lip. He thoughtlessly reaches up to wipe at his forehead and it presses painfully on a bruise above their brows.

"What are you doing here?" He asks. Then, belatedly, gestures to his face and says, "Oh. Sorry."

"What the hell happened?"

"A lot. A lot happened and it was all my fault and Jonathan hit me because I said some stupid bullshit and I couldn't hit him back, I was just trying to say the meanest thing I could think of because I wanted to hurt him because he's Nancy's soulmate but it was so fucked to even—"

He's practically slurring his words in an attempt to get them all out. Robin tries to focus on at least one detail. "Jonathan Byers?"

"Yeah."

"He's Nancy's soulmate?" Robin repeats.

Steve nods. It's impossible to feel your soulmate's emotional pain. Probably an evolutionary choice, because if you had to deal with

someone else's heartache on top of your own you might as well just give up. But Robin must be an anomaly because she *swears* her heart aches a little, an echo of the way his must. It must mean he really does like Nancy, despite all the dancing around the labels and his extensive history of dating girls for a month and moving on to the next.

"So Barb…?" Robin asks. It feels wrong to use her name in something so trivial right now while her face is plastered around town and her parents are crying on the news every night, but Robin needs to know.

"I told you. They were platonic soulmates. Nancy always knew. God the way she must *feel* right now and I— I'm not going to be a good soulmate." Steve informs her, laughing ruefully. "You were right. We should just ignore it because I'm going to do a horrible job. I always do the wrong thing, I just—I *always* pick wrong."

"Hey, well, you didn't pick me. Right? It was fate. Or God." Seeing his absolute frenzy somehow makes her calmer. It's clear to her now. Nancy and Barb were soulmates and now Barb is gone, maybe dead, and Robin can pretend Steve isn't her soulmate all she wants but he could die too and she'd feel it. She would lose something.

"You don't even like me." Steve says, lost. "Why are you here?"

"I just felt like I had to be. I guess you were right about platonic soulmates being a thing because everything has felt really wrong since I left the locker room. And," Robin takes a deep breath, teetering on the edge, "I'm not going to fall in love with you. I just know that for a fact and it's—I mean it's nothing personal. But everything is so crazy right now and I think we should at least try to keep an eye out for each other, right? Buddy system."

"Buddy system." Steve repeats, eyes blank. "Things *are* crazy. You have no idea."

"Did you do this?" She gestures upward. There's a rag in his hand that's stained watery red. Whatever he did, he's undoing it. Or trying to.

"Basically." He presses a hand to his eyes and she winces. He drops it.

“Sorry. I think I’ve been sort of an asshole for most of my life.”

Can she take credit for this? Is it a coincidence that she reveals herself to be his soulmate mere days before he realizes that there’s a fatal flaw in the way he treats people? It feels like something written in a book that Robin would point out as a plot hole. Of *course* he just so happens to change his ways as it’s convenient for her. And maybe this is temporary. Maybe he’s never really going to change.

But Robin will find out. What else does she have to do, anyways?

“I have to finish this.” He tells her, inching back towards the ladder. “And then I have to go somewhere. But um, I can call you later or something? Buddy system.”

“Yeah.” She nods. It feels awkward, but the thought of him calling fills some anxiety in her chest with comfort. “Don’t get punched anymore.”

He laughs. “No promises. It’s payback for what you did to our ankle.”

Robin gasps. “I was *twelve*.”

“Mm, I’ll take it into account.” He gives her a smile that only lasts a few seconds before it dissolves into something serious. He steps back down the last two rungs of the ladder. “Robin, stay inside this week. Okay? Trust me. Be careful.”

She shrugs. “I know. I went to the assembly.”

He grins at her tightly, like he knows something she doesn’t. Robin suddenly wants to know where it is he’s going after this. Jonathan Byers punching him and Barb going missing and Nancy apparently fighting with him all seems too insane to fit inside the course of a week, and yet Steve seems resigned in a way that indicates he’s accepted it all.

There’s so much about him she doesn’t know, she realizes.

“I’ll call you.” He says, climbing back up.

“I’ll answer.”

Author's Note:

this fic was a birthday present for my beloved em @lesbianrobin because we have talked about steve and robin being platonic soulmates since the dawn of time and perhaps i will maybe even continue this au if people are into that? who knows. im on tumblr @steveharrington come talk 2 me